REVIEWS

HISTORY AND LITERATURE IN NORTHERN IRELAND: CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON THEIR JOINT AGENCY

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Marilynn Richtarik, *Getting to Good Friday: Literature and the Peace Process in Northern Ireland*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023. 274 pp. ISBN 9780192886408.

"Did that play of mine send out / Certain men the English shot?" W.B. Yeats asks in the late poem "The Man and the Echo," which takes account of the questions pestering him most burningly at the end of his life when "all seem[ed] evil."[1] That play was the highly popular *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902), co-authored with Lady Augusta Gregory, which continued to be a sweeping success from its revolutionary first night throughout Ireland's struggle for independence and beyond. In 1938 Yeats's question sounded a still valid one, implying reference to the defeated Easter Rising of 1916 and the martyrdom of its leaders in an era when history, politics and literature became strongly aligned in Ireland. Decades later, there appeared a comparable alignment in Northern Ireland, part of the island of Éire having remained under British rule where, as a result of partition, the accumulating tension between the two main communities, Protestants and Catholics, led to open conflicts and the destruction of both human lives and the environment on a massive scale. The "Troubles," as the conflict-ridden, generation-long period lasting from 1968 to the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 was euphemistically called, induced a number of unsuccessful attempts to disarm the paramilitary organizations and bring peace to the population of Northern Ireland. As it is not unusual in like circumstances, literature responding to the social, cultural and psychological trauma, grief and intolerable absurdities generated by the deadlock of the situation was flourishing, rich in vital themes and formal experimenting. In his Nobel Prize Speech (1995), Seamus Heaney credits poetry and, by extension, literature in Northern Ireland through analogies when mentioning "images and stories" which had their role in "the erosion of the Soviet regimes […] by the sheer persistence, beneath the imposed ideological conformity, of cultural values and psychic resistances of a kind that these stories and images enshrine."[2]

1 W.B. Yeats, "The Man and the Echo," in *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1965), 393-95.

2 Seamus Heaney, "Crediting Poetry," https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1995/heaney/lecture/.

In 2023, the Good Friday Agreement had its 25th anniversary, commemorated and celebrated by several programmes. Marilynn Richtarik, the author of the monograph under review here, joined the celebratory events in her own scholarly way, writing and publishing *Getting to Good Friday: Literature and the Peace Process in Northern Ireland*, which explores the strong links between literary production and its political background. Richtarik, a dedicated scholar of Northern Irish literature, culture and theatre, is internationally recognized for her volume on Field Day (*Acting between the Lines: The Field Day Theatre Company and Irish Cultural Politics 1980-1984*, 1994) and her biography of Stewart Parker (*Stewart Parker: A Life*, 2012), which unquestionably serve as indispensable sources of any critical inquiry into the fields they cover. This book begins with a detailed chronology of events and publications from 1980, when Republican prisoners went on hunger strikes, up to 10 April 1998 when the Belfast Agreement was approved and signed by all negotiators. Throughout, one important merit of Richtarik's work remains, which is providing the reader with precise information about the unusual context to and political embedding of the literary texts she has chosen for scrutiny.

In the author's words, the book "centres on literary reactions and contributions to progress towards peace in Northern Ireland during the fifteen years preceding the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, which officially ended three decades of sectarian violence" (4). Importantly for the enterprise, Richtarik "contend[s] that literature *as literature* (that is, in its formal properties, in addition to anything it might have to 'say' about a given subject) can enrich our historical understanding" (4). Undoubtedly, it is a huge challenge to achieve a balance in the intertwining of literary and historical explorations to enhance understanding of the cultural and historical complexities of Northern Ireland. *Getting to Good Friday: Literature and the Peace Process in Northern Ireland* comprises five chapters between its "Introduction" and "Conclusion," given respective one-word titles referring to cultural, psychological and emotional processes. In each chapter, "Storytelling," "Understanding," "Grieving," "Repeating" and "Drafting" the literary works selected by Richtarik display a great variety showing the richness of the literary production characteristic of those years.

The chapter "Storytelling" addresses Brian Friel's play, *Making History* (1988), in a sense continuing Richtarik's research published in her book on the Field Day Theatre Company. Relying on archival material she explains why the writing of *Making History* took long years amid the changes in the political management of Northern Ireland which signified history currently happening. Friel was inspired to write fictionalized stories about that history, with the title of the play aptly reflecting this duality. His progress with the play, Richtarik claims, intensified when the Anglo-Irish Agreement was signed in 1985, after which outraged

Unionists made the "marching season" of July uncommonly threatening for the Catholic population (25). In this context, the dramatised historical characters of Hugh O'Neill and his third wife, the English Mabel Bagenal, can be seen as representing the two conflicting cultures of Northern Ireland. The chief novelty of Richtarik's analysis lies in exploring a gendered connection between this unusual love story and modes of storytelling in the drama, a connection understudied in scholarship. The chapter suggests that beside Hugh's and Lombard's parallel but divergent narratives about the historical significance of Hugh's choices and deeds, the drama itself also embodies a way of storytelling. Crucially, Friel changes the date of Mabel's death for later, thus keeping her "alive from the audience's perspective through the recounting of various developments that vindicate her opinion of the war" against which she warned her husband, the critic says (33). Richtarik identifies this deviation from the recorded facts as a device allowing for the interpretation that Friel's Hugh was defeated by the English army at Kinsale mostly because he rejected Mabel's thoughtful, pragmatic advice to defend native Irish rights and the Gaelic culture by peaceful means. Richtarik's conclusion about the anachronistic and history making feature of the play stresses its "obvious application to Ireland in the late 1980s, where contemporary republicans had a similar decision to make between political engagement with the enemy and continuing the war, even at the expense of their own people and ultimate goals" (33). Christopher Murray's Friel monograph which Richtarik draws on at points, along with Anthony Roche's, is worth quoting for a succinctly phrased summary about the role of Mabel: "O'Neill is locked into a history to which Mabel alone, the Other, had the key."[3] It is also the key to the tragic ending of the play, a (negative) "history lesson" in Richtarik's words (33).

Titled "Understanding," Chapter Two of the book encompasses the period beginning in 1986 and running up to the ceasefire announced by the IRA in 1994, the addressed literary works being *The Cure at Troy* (1990), a drama by Seamus Heaney, and the poem "Ceasefire" (1994) by Michael Longley. *The Cure at Troy*, first performed by the Field Day Theatre Company like *Making History* two years earlier, shares thematic links with Friel's drama through a dilemma concerning the employment of military acts. Richtarik claims that in her analysis of *The Cure at Troy* she intends to put "into concrete terms" the usually abstract idea of Heaney scholars that the play is in close relationship with the peace process (45). So Richtarik takes the road of answering the "whys" she implicitly raises about the genesis and political embedding of *The Cure at Troy*, to serve the general focus and

[3] Christopher Murray, *The Theatre of Brian Friel: Tradition and Modernity* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 103.

aims of her present book. An inspiration for the play, she suggests, was the "developing personal relationship" between John Hume, "leader of the constitutional nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party" and Gerry Adams, "President of Sinn Féin" who shared Republican aims with the IRA and "refused to condemn the use of force" by that paramilitary organisation (40). Hume had been an intimate friend of Heaney, who knew about the secret conversations between the two politicians. Therefore, Richtarik's view that "Hume fits neatly into the mediating role of Neoptolemus" while Philoctetes's position "can suit a Sinn Féiner," seems to be well established, also because Adams "had refused to take his seat at Westminster" (53). The critic's political reading of these dramatic characters, however, does not lead to interpreting them in allegorical terms: their association with the peace process in real life is valid all the more so that her analysis of Heaney's insertion of "an original long speech" in poetic form by the Chorus at the closure of *The Cure at Troy* looks upon it as an expression of hope for peace in the future (54-55). The desired future arrived when after many talks and dedicated efforts made by politicians, the IRA announced ceasefire in 1994. Written in the atmosphere of temporary relief, Michael Longley's poem "Ceasefire" deploys aspects of the Trojan War to offer parallels with the conflict in Northern Ireland like Heaney's work, shaped into a four-part sonnet which articulates the emotional complexity of developing a non-antagonistic view of the enemy. About the poet's choice and method Richtarik writes: "Longley knew that, in isolating intimate moments from the *Iliad* to draw attention to the human cost of war, he was merely amplifying what was already in the original" (79).

Under the title "Grieving" Richtarik discusses literary expressions of grief over loss and death as well as the long-lasting painful memories of victims and their families. Writers Deirdre Madden and Seamus Deane were both working on novels in the pivotal year of 1994. As Richtarik asserts, "These books, Madden's *One by One in the Darkness* and Deane's *Reading in the Dark,* would not be published until 1996, yet the ceasefires did little to mitigate their sombre tones" (86). Intra-communal divisions in perspectives on manifestations of the ongoing violence, known from Heaney's play too, are foregrounded in Madden's novel, within the extended family of the Catholic Quinns whose members experience and cope with the paralysing constraints of the Troubles in different ways. The narrative, Richtarik argues, "gains poignancy through being relayed from the point of view of maturing children, who acquire much of their knowledge and awareness […] via overheard and imperfectly understood adult conversations" (90). Structurally, alternate renderings of psychic experiences disrupt linearity here, while "filtering the violence through the controlling desires and dreams of her protagonists, Madden reveals the architecture of the grieving process" (93), Richtarik contends.

The inclusion of Deane's book, *Reading in the Dark,* in Richtarik's selection may strike the reader as a cuckoo's egg, given that it covers the years before the outbreak of the Troubles and only the last, very short vignette in it is dated 1971. However, it fits in with the thematic line because of reinforcing historical connections: Richtarik's governing idea in the chapter is that "[w]hile Madden concentrates on the late twentieth-century Troubles, Deane examines the belated effects of the Troubles of the 1920s, revealing the two conflicts to be part of a continuum" (97). The selection of *Reading in the Dark* can also be linked to Richtarik's concern with Field Day in her first book, since Deane was one of the directors of that company and general editor of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (1991). She identifies the novel as loosely autobiographical and her main focus is on the young protagonist's suspicions that some deeply buried secret plagues their family relations. According to Richtarik, the "central conflict in *Reading in the Dark* is that between the protagonist's overwhelming urge to uncover family secrets and his parents' equally fervent desire to conceal them" (105). It can be regarded is a 'coming-of-age' book, representing the pitfalls of becoming an adult in the extremely stressful society of Northern Ireland. The narrator's questions about the past remain unanswered, and the readers' expectations are also unfulfilled. "The discomfort thus created, though, may be the book's profoundest comment on the after-effects of loss: lost time, lost opportunity, lost love, lost life," Richtarik notes (115).

The fourth chapter is titled "Repeating." Belfast-born Bernard MacLaverty's novel, *Grace Notes* (1997) is in the focus which, like Deane's *Reading in the Dark,* took years to be written and the author changed the title a few times before he managed to finalize the text. Parallel with her account of the post-1994 political stalemate Richtarik introduces David Trimble, who became president of the UUP (Ulster Unionist Party) and a key figure in the peace talks on the Protestant side. *Grace Notes* is a novel difficult to pin down as a piece of Troubles literature; on first reading, it seems to be a sensitive portrayal of a young woman, Catherine McKenna, who left the Belfast home of her parents, studied music in Britain, gave life to a daughter out of wedlock and suffered from post-natal depression. Richtarik's analysis not only places the novel in the political context but also views it as a work suggesting the possibility of progress, albeit on a small scale, through its protagonist's groping toward self-expression in the composition of music. "Like *The Cure at Troy, Grace Notes* is an affirmative text written in defiance of its contemporary context" Richtarik claims, noting that "broken relationships and awkward conversations" in the novel "serve as metaphors for the tense political situation and what would be required to improve it" (136-37). As an example, she underscores the slight change in the development of the initially very tense mother-daughter relationship. The title of the chapter, "Repeating," refers to the seemingly unalterable elements of sectarian culture which, however, can assume some new meaning, as Richtarik suggests in her analysis of Catherine's two-part

symphonic work *Vernicle* with a Lambeg drum changing its tone from threatening to joyful. "In presenting her work as he does, MacLaverty offers readers a memorable illustration of how artists can contribute to the ongoing enterprise of creating a more inclusive sense of Northern Irish identity" Richtarik concludes (146-47).

"Drafting," the title of Chapter Five, refers to the collaborative creation and signing of the document which is known as the Good Friday Agreement, a result of many months' negotiations and hard work of considerations and re-considerations. Here Richtarik chooses to discuss a novel, Colum McCann's *TransAtlantic* (2013), a chapter of which presents a personalized view of the last two, very hectic weeks of the peace process as experienced by George Mitchell, the United States Special Envoy for Northern Ireland, who joined and set principles to the team of representative politicians involved in composing and finalizing the epoch-making agreement. As Richtarik sees it, "McCann's treatment of the peace process in *TransAtlantic* accords with autobiographical and historical accounts of it in the emphasis placed upon textual issues" (175). However, her book does not end on an elevated note. Its concluding part, under the subheading "Truth Seeking," examines the novel *The Truth Commissioner* by David Park (2008) in meticulous detail to show how the Good Friday Agreement opened the door to different and conflicting narratives as part of its aftermath.

The specialness of writing a book about a very difficult historical period along with some pieces of the vast treasury of literature responding to it which *Getting to Good Friday: Literature and the Peace Process in Northern Ireland* undertakes, has its risks, though. For the historian or student of history the book may not present original enough interpretations of the relevant events and processes, while the literature-minded reader would like to see a more varied spectrum of the literary texts addressed. It is especially the chapter "Drafting" where historical details are overwhelming compared with comments on McCann's novel. Surprisingly as a scholar of Friel and Parker, Richtarik does not include more plays in the chapters, and she focuses on only one woman author's (Deirdre Madden's) work, sidelining issues of gender to an extent. Plays by Christina Reid or Anne Devlin might fruitfully have added to the discussion of the alignment between politics and theatre. On the other hand, the personal narratives and persistent tension dramatized by Owen McCafferty's *Quietly* (2012) might have further elucidated the notion of "truth commissioning" beside Park's novel. These notes aside, the book remains a finely researched and valuable study of its complicated subject, which should definitely find its way to both institutional and personal libraries.

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